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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [KIRC](#) [SCUL](#) [AF](#)  
SUBJECT: DEBUNKING THE MYTH - PD WORK REALLY IS POSSIBLE IN AFGHANISTAN!

**¶1. SUMMARY:** Contrary to popular belief that American diplomats remain isolated behind compound walls, PD officers in Kabul routinely travel around the city and throughout the country. Too much emphasis has been placed on "messaging," too little on building personal relationship that allow the message to take root. Putting the 'public' back into public diplomacy was high on our list of objectives this past year, and has paid some handsome dividends.  
END SUMMARY.

#### UNIVERSITY OUTREACH

**¶2.** University students have been one of our key target audiences this year. Kabul University, the largest, oldest, and nearest university to the embassy, has been the logical nexus of our activities. Although we were told before our arrival in the summer of 2008 that cultural programming would be impossible in Afghanistan, Fine Arts students at Kabul University participated with great enthusiasm in workshops involving American musicians, dancing for the first time. The Journalism Faculty received special attention, thanks to the Chancellor's plea. Working with our Military Information Support Team (MIST), we will train and equip the faculty so that students can begin producing moderate messages. This summer, professors will depart to the United States for an International Visitor's program on journalism education.

**¶3.** During this past winter break, ECA/A offered the first-ever Study of the U.S. Institute for Afghans. A dozen English-speaking senior students, chosen from the top of their classes, spent five weeks in the United States. They have returned for their final university year with extremely positive impressions that they share with their peers. The students emphasized how impressed they were that their Christian coordinator showed such sensitivity that he reserved time on Fridays for the group to go to mosque; the female students noted that their first time to a mosque was in the United States!

**¶4.** Most recently, Ambassador Ricciardone visited Kabul University - a two hour visit, that stretched to four, that easily could have been six hours long! This was the first time that any Chief of Mission had been to Kabul University in several years, to the delight of the Chancellor, the faculty, and the students of the Journalism Faculty, with whom he met at an event in honor of World Press Freedom Day. As he walked to the tomb of Sayyid Jamal-al-Din, he responded to questions from international and local press on civilian causalities and the U.S. position on upcoming Afghan elections. Once there, he paid his respects to "Al-Afghani," one of the founders of Islamic modernism, a gesture greatly appreciated by the Afghans present.

#### THEMATIC PROGRAMMING

**¶5.** With outreach a priority, the cultural section embarked upon a series of thematic programming initiatives, beginning with celebrations of Ramadan in September, followed by the U.S. Elections, International Women's Day, and other special events or days.

**¶6.** The Public Affairs Section's multi-pronged Ramadan programming conveyed the message that the U.S. respects Islam, a critical point in a country where most people identify themselves first by

religion. We emphasized that the War on Terror was not a war on Islam and highlighted our shared values. We launched our programming with the Ambassador giving an exclusive media tour of a mosque being restored through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. We organized Iftaars, distributed "Mosques of America" booklets in local languages, and arranged broadcast of the Dari and Pashto language video "Islam in America," which reached more than 10 million viewers nation-wide and elicited significant positive feedback. We sent out Eid holiday cards and arranged an Eid party at the Embassy for orphans attending Access English programs.

¶7. In the run-up to the U.S. elections, we hosted journalists and journalism students for two webcasts from the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. PD-Kabul then organized four webchats and two DVCs to capitalize on local interest. Speakers from other sections, including the Pol Chief, Pol-Mil Chief, visiting Information Resource Officer, and poloffs, joined PD officers in giving election presentations at universities, schools where English instruction is subsidized by the USG, and in the regions. Throughout the country, 15 election speaker events reached more than 500 people, mostly students. Programming culminated in a morning event at Kabul's Serena Hotel celebrating the power of democracy as election results came in. For the first time in thirty years, Afghans and Americans witnessed the peaceful transfer of power together.

#### CULTURAL PROGRAMMING

¶8. We used cultural programming in Afghanistan to demonstrate that the future, with its vibrant music and dance offerings, stands in stark contrast to the darkness of its Taliban past. After a lull of several years, we once again offered cultural programming. In

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October 2008, the group 'American Voices' held workshops, performed to enthusiastic crowds, and made media appearances in Kabul. In the spring, for the Persian New Year, we worked with ECA to sponsor 'Alvin Atkinson & the Sound Merchants,' first to Mazar-e-Sharif to participate in the single most significant Afghan cultural event of the year, the "Red Tulip International Music Festival" and then back to Kabul for student workshops and performances. Playing live for more than 1,500 people (with broadcasts reaching more than 10 million), these musicians presented a non-military face of the U.S. to Afghans, demonstrating that a common language in music transcends barriers.

¶9. Convinced that Afghans needed to see positive representations of their country and culture, we arranged a photography exhibition of Steve McCurry's work in order to balance the hard images dominating the media. Every Friday, 2,500+ Afghans viewed portraits, stunning landscapes, and images of Afghans hard at work. More than 2,000 students have visited the exhibition on field trips, guided by PD-trained Kabul University students. Custom-made wooden frames launched a small business, and revenue from the space rental contributes to the sustainability of Babur Gardens (and increased demand for the space for future exhibitions). Steve McCurry held workshops for students and photojournalists during his 48 hours in Kabul - the first IIP Speaker program in several years.

#### PD AT THE PRTs

¶10. Everything that we've accomplished in Kabul has been effectively transferred to our work in the regions and at Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). This year was the first year we had a PD officer specifically dedicated to working with PRTs - in effect, serving as PAO for 26 'consulates,' providing each of them with advice and guidance on all things related to media, education, and outreach. Since PRTs include more than just State Department representatives, she shared her PD efforts with other agency representatives, U.S. military public affairs and information officers, and even civilian PAOs from other countries such as Canada and the Czech Republic. As a result, the PRTs now have expanded outreach capabilities.

#### LINCOLN CENTERS (LCs)

¶11. During this fiscal year we will triple the number of Lincoln Centers supported by post. Three existing Lincoln Centers in

Jalalabad, Kabul University and Mazar-e-Sharif were founded in 2005 and 2006. LCs were launched this past year in Herat, Bamyan, and Khost, with three more slated to open in Gardez, Kunduz and one at the Kabul Women's Garden.

¶12. Both in Kabul and through our PRTers, we have used these 'outposts' as an effective tool for reaching Afghan audiences. Because LC events are part of our PD efforts, we include in each Weekly Report highlights of their activities, ranging from roundtable discussions, English classes, or programs highlighting special days or events. LCs reached more than 62,000 visitors this past year, over a third of the total for all of SCA. In February 2009, there were 12,000 visitors at the Lincoln Centers, a 340 percent increase over February 2008. We currently have requests to open more LCs in practically every province of Afghanistan!

#### ENGLISH LANGUAGE INITIATIVES

¶13. For the first time ever, we've expanded Access English programs to include the Shia minority population in Kabul. We have also extended our efforts to regional cities. Working through the orphanage system, our program now runs in Jawzjan, Kunduz, and Mazar-e-Sharif. By working with the English Teacher's Association for Afghans, we will reach low-income students in the insecure cities of Kandahar, Khost, and Jalalabad. We also offer Access English programs in Bamyan and Herat.

¶14. We've also taken new initiatives to support English teachers in Afghanistan. In addition to the first visit of an English Teaching Specialist to Kabul and Herat, a PD grant supported six week-long English teaching workshops in three provinces (Herat, Ghor, and Bamyan).

#### PUBLICATIONS

¶15. We established a library of PD giveaways, including publications in Farsi, Dari, and Pashto produced by State, USAID, the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, and MIST. We share products on key mission priorities such as democracy, anti-narcotics, and media freedom. Finding that pre-printed materials insufficiently addressed our needs, we regularly created electronic handouts and Powerpoints in local languages that support thematic programming.

¶16. While waiting to meet the district governor, Paktika's PRT representatives distributed PD's 'Mosques of America' booklets, copies of the constitution, and 'Mosques of America' wall calendar to residents. The district governor, a 2007 IVLP alumnus, held up a wall calendar and explained, "The U.S. has many mosques and respects

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Islam." He asked for additional wall calendars. After residents left, the district governor explained to the PRT team that it was a great service to have given the PD materials to them. He noted that they came from parts of the district under Taliban influence, and these materials would help them understand that the U.S. is not as Taliban propaganda describes it. This shows again the great value of these Pashto-language materials, and the lasting value of the IV program.

#### MITIGATING SECURITY RISKS

¶17. Cooperation and coordination with our Regional Security Office was key to conducting public diplomacy. They issued the section its own tracking devices so they could monitor our movements and ensure our safety; equipped with emergency call buttons, we were confident in their ability to monitor, find and extract us if need be (fortunately, it never was.) They developed and provided special intel briefings on common routes and venues used by PD personnel. Although not a requirement, RSO also worked with PD and provided body armor to PD FSO's, which we use when traveling to each venue. Only in rare circumstances, and based upon credible threats, were our travel requests denied, and we truly are thankful to RSO's office for their partnership and support in helping us accomplish our mission.

¶18. CONCLUSION: Looking back on the highlights over this past year, we realize that we have been fortunate to have had staff and funds to support these activities. Over the course of the past year, PD

Kabul has gone 'the last three feet' to reach more Afghans than ever. Some of our most valuable memories come from our frequent contact with regular Afghans. Our advice to those who will take on public diplomacy responsibilities in future years to come: Challenge your assumptions. More is possible in Afghanistan than one might imagine!

RICCIARDONE